David Erskine Baker, Biographia dramatica; or, A companion to the playhouse, 3rd ed., rev. Stephen Jones (London, 1812), vol. 3, pp. 1--4.

1a

3. MACBETH. Trag. by W. Shakspeare. Fol. 1623. This play is extremely irregular, every one of the rules of the drama being entirely and repeatedly broken in upon: yet, notwithstanding, it contains an infinity of beauties, both with respect to language, character, passion, and incident. The incantations of the witches are equal, if not superior, to the *Canidia* of Horace. The use this author has made of Banquo's ghost, towards heightening the already heated imagination of Macbeth, is inimitably fine. Lady Macbeth, discovering her own crimes in her

1b

sleep, is perfectly original, and admirably conducted. Macbeth's soliloquies, both before and after the murder, are masterpieces of unmatchable writing; while his readiness of being deluded at first by the witches, and his desperation on the discovery of the fatal ambiguity, and loss of all hope from supernatural predictions, produce a catastrophe truly just, and formed with the utmost judgment. In a word, notwithstanding all its irregularities, it is certainly one of the best pieces of the very best master in this kind of writing that the world ever produced. The plot is founded on the Scottish history, and may be traced in the writings of Hector Boethius, Buchanan, Holingshed, &c. in Heywood's *Hierarchy of Angels*, and in

the first book of Heylin's *Cosmography*. The entire story at large, however, collected from them all, is to be seen in a work, in three volumes 12mo. entitled *Shakspeare Illustrated*, vol. i. The scene in the end of the fourth act lies in England. Through all the rest of the play it is in Scotland, and chiefly at Macbeth's castle at Inverness.

2a

"This play (says Dr. Johnson) is deservedly celebrated for the propriety of its fictions, and solemnity, grandeur, and variety of its action; but it has no nice discriminations of character: the events are too great to admit the influence of particular dispositions, and the course of the action necessarily determines the conduct of the agents.

"The danger of ambition is well described; and I know not whether it may not be said, in defence of some parts which now seem improbable, that in Shakspeare's time it was necessary to warn credulity against vain and illusive predictions.

"The passions are directed to their true end. Lady Macbeth is merely detested; and though the courage of Macbeth preserves some esteem, yet every reader rejoices at his fall."

Mr. Harris, in his *Philosophical Arrangements*,<*> observes of this tragedy:

"It is not only admirable as a *poem*; but is, perhaps, at the same time one of the most *moral* pieces existing. It teaches us the danger of venturing, though but for *once*, upon a capital offence, by showing us that it

is impossible *to be wicked by halves*; and that we cannot stop; that we are in a manner compelled to proceed; and yet that, *be the success as it may*, we are sure in the event to become *wretched* and *unhappy*."

An anonymous critic objects, and we think justly, to the stage practice of a numerous chorus of witches. After paying a tribute of praise to the chief characters, as performed by Mr. Kemble and Mrs. Siddons, he adds, "but my pleasure, and, I am persuaded,

<* James Harris, *Philosophical arrangements* (London, 1775), 228–9.>

2b

that of many others, has always been lessened by a circumstance, which I would fain submit to the consideration of managers, -- the introduction of a chorus of witches much more numerous than was intended by Shakspeare. According to the utmost latitude allowed by any construction of his play, the number of these should not exceed six; and there is indeed much reason to believe, with Mr. Ritson, that Hecate should not have more than three visible attendants. The direction 'Enter Hecate and the three other witches,' when there are already three upon the stage, is probably erroneous, no other three having before been mentioned. As far as relates to the witches, it appears to mean *Manent*; in the way that in the printed copies of many plays, all the characters, who are to remain upon the stage, are enumerated after every entrance. However this may

be, the score, or more, of vocal performers who are brought on in russet cloaks, and drawn up in rank for full ten minutes in front of the stage, are intruders upon the scene of Shakspeare, who well knew how his illusions must be broken by a near and distinct view of many real, substantial persons, in the business of his incantations. Their presence would be injurious in such a scene, supposing it possible that a crowd of mere hags could be collected to sing as we wish them. As it is, they are fatal to the whole course of ideas that should attend us in this part of the play. The men are mostly comedians, as well as singers; and, whatever they may intend, their countenances,

3a

as soon as they are recognised, throw an air of burlesque upon the whole. The women, who are generally pretty enough, to *be-witch* us in a sense very different from Shakspeare's, are often employed in laughing with each other, and sometimes with the audience, at their dresses, which they think frightful, but which, in fact, conceal neither their bright eyes, nor rosy lips, nor, scarcely, their neat silk stockings. Now all this interruption to the solemn influence of the scene may be avoided by an easy alteration in the performance. The fine words of the incantations (partly Shakpeare's and partly Middleton's), the highly-appropriate music of Locke, the harmony of our best voices may all be preserved, and the scene rescued from its pre-

sent violation, by stationing the whole chorus behind the scenes, partly on the ground and partly aloft, to make their responses in the intervals of the spells of Hecate and her three attendants. The music would indisputably be heard with an effect more suitable to the occasion; and our eyes would not then persuade us to think of the *playbill*, instead of *Macbeth*."

4. MACBETH. Trag. with all the alterations, amendments, additions, and new songs. Acted at the Duke's Theatre. 4to. 1674. This alteration was made by Sir William Davenant.

Downes the prompter says, that Nat Lee, the poet, having an inclination to turn actor, had the part of Duncan assigned to him on this revival, but did not succeed in it. His name, however, stands against the character in the printed copy. It was performed with

3b

great splendour. The admirable music by Mr. Locke is still retained.

5. MACBETH, the Historical Tragedy of (written originally by Shakspeare). Newly adapted to the stage, with alterations by J. Lee, as performed at the Theatre in Edinburgh. 8vo. 1753. Language is not strong enough to express our contempt of Mr. Lee's performance. If sense, spirit, and versification, were ever discoverable in Shakspeare's play, so sure has our reformer laid them all in ruins. Criticism disdains to point out each particular mischief of this monkey hand; but yet, gentle

reader, accept the following specimen of its attempt to improve the well-known incantation with which the fourth act begins:

1. Witch.
No milk-maid yet hath been bedew'd.
2. Witch.
But thrice the brinded cat hath mew'd.
3. Witch.
Twice and once the hedge-pig whin'd,
Shutting his eyes against the wind.
1. Witch.
Up hollow oaks now emmets climb.
2. Witch.
And Hecate cries, 'T is time, 't is time.
3. Witch.
Then round about the cauldron go,
And poison'd entrails in it throw.
1. Witch.
Toad (that under mossy stone,
Nights and days has, thirty-one,
Swelter'd venom sleeping got)
Boil first in the enchanted pot, &c. &c.

6. MACBETH. Trag. by Wm. Shakspeare. Collated with the old and modern editions. 8vo. 1773.<*>

7. MACBETH. Tragedy, by William Shakspeare. With Notes and Emendations, by Harry Rowe, &c. Printed at York. 8vo. 1799. The criticisms and emendations are more amusing than solid.

8. MACBETH. Trag. by Shakspeare. Revised by J. P. Kemble,

<* Jennens's edition.>

and now first published as it is acted at Covent Garden Theatre. 8vo. 1803.